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# CANADIAN ROUND TABLES ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY: Their History, Form and Function

by

**Ronald L. Doering**

March 1993  
(Revised September 1993)

Unedited Working Paper for Discussion

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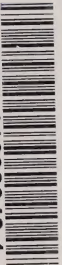
1 Nicholas Street, Suite 1500  
Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 7B7  
Ph: (613) 992-7189 Fax: (613) 992-7385

pour commentaires ou exemplaires contacter:

**Table ronde nationale sur  
l'environnement et l'économie (TRNEE)**

1, rue Nicholas, bureau 1500  
Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 7B7  
Tél: (613) 992-7189 Fax: (613) 992-7385

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## Introduction

Round Tables on the Environment and the Economy have been Canada's principal institutional response to the challenge of sustainable development. These innovative multi-stakeholder organizations have taken root in all provinces and territories as well as at the national and municipal levels. While remarkably diverse in their make-up and functioning, they share the goal of promoting the principles and practices of sustainable development through consensual decision-making.

Canada's round tables are still at the developmental stage. It is too early to evaluate their long term effectiveness or to fully understand their current or future role in the scheme of things. The strong and growing domestic and international interest is heartening for all of us within the round table movement. For the information of people interested in our work the following is an introductory outline of the history, form and function of some of Canada's round tables.

## History

In October, 1986, the Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers (CCREM) established the National Task Force on Environment and Economy. Its purpose was to initiate dialogue on integrating the environment and the economy among Canada's environment ministers, senior business executives, as well as leaders of environmental organizations and the academic community. CCREM asked the task force to make recommendations and report back in September, 1987.

The task force grew out of the Brundtland Commission's visit to Canada in May, 1986, and, in particular, the members' meeting with CCREM and participants in Edmonton, Alberta.

CCREM also asked the task force to consider the findings of the World Conservation Strategy Conference, held in Ottawa in June, 1986, at which worldwide progress on conservation strategy development was reviewed. While emphasizing the

importance of sustainable development to continued economic prosperity, the task force's principal institutional recommendation was that round tables on environment and economy be created at the national and provincial levels of government. Membership would be drawn from government, large and small industry, environmental organizations, labour, academia, and aboriginal peoples. Round tables, in the words of the National Task Force, were intended to be permanent fora in which senior decision-makers can meet to candidly discuss environment-economy issues and make recommendations directly to the First Ministers of their respective jurisdictions. Round tables would also report their conclusions directly to the public.

Round tables were not designed to challenge the authority of any existing office or institution, nor to function as decision-making bodies. Instead, they would exert influence, founded on their credibility, independence, and the exchange of views of important sectors and levels of society. Depending on the needs and desires of each jurisdiction, the round tables' mandate might include overseeing and advising major studies, developing strategy, and sponsoring special reports or demonstration projects (*projets exemplificateurs*). They could also review progress on state-of-the-environment reporting.

The task force was convinced that such new multi-stakeholder institutions were essential if Canada was to become more sustainable in its development. Consensus-seeking groups could, like the task force itself, work co-operatively to develop a strategy that integrated the environment with the economy at all government levels and across the private sector. As one of its members, Dr. D. Chant, commented: "Environmental conservation and economic development not only can co-exist, they must co-exist, for one is a condition of the other."

The task force membership included presidents or chief executive officers from Alcan Aluminium, Dow Chemical, Noranda Forest Inc. and Inco, seven ministers of the Environment, the president of the

Canadian Petroleum Association, the chairman of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, a senior academic scientist and two environmentalists.

The response to the task force's report was strongly positive from all sectors of Canadian society and, obviously, it addressed many of their problems and needs. All levels of government moved quickly and publicly to support the report; within three years, all provinces, both territories, and the federal government had established round tables. While, as we shall see, it is too soon to evaluate the ultimate success of these unique bodies, the very fact that they were created was truly remarkable, particularly at a time of widespread public cynicism and entrenched government inertia. In the face of this, one commentator has suggested that broad public support for the emergence of round tables springs from the perception that they, at least, represent a "sign of hope".

## Form

While remarkably diverse in both form and function, round tables on environment and economy share three common features: (1) they work to promote sustainable development (2) by consensus decision-making (3) through multi-stakeholder processes.

### 1) Promotion of Sustainable Development

All have the mandate to promote policies and processes that, to quote the Brundtland report, "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." For example, the Alberta Round Table (ARTEE), has the mission "to work to achieve sustainable development by providing leadership policy advice, and long-term strategies to government, business and the general public." The mandate of the National Round Table (NRTEE), as set out in legislation, is to "play the role of catalyst in identifying, explaining, and promoting in all sectors of Canadian society and in all regions of Canada, principles and practices of sustainable development." It does this by undertaking

research and analysis, advising governments and other sectors on sustainable development issues, and by increasing public awareness of the cultural, social, economic and environmental policy changes required to achieve sustainable development.

### 2) Consensus-Based Decision-Making

Because all round tables are non-hierarchical and bring together representatives from diverse interests, decision-making must, of necessity, be consensus based. Round tables have contributed to, and have been informed by, the growing movement to finding alternatives to adversarial forms of dispute resolution. Both the Alberta and B.C. round tables have pioneered new approaches, while the national and all provincial round tables have joined forces to develop a common guide to consensus decision-making for promoting sustainable development. The guide has been ratified by all bodies and will be published in the fall of 1993.

### 3) Multi-stakeholder

All of Canada's round tables have broad-based, diverse representation from business, labour, academia, aboriginal peoples, and environmental groups. The Brundtland Commission was particularly insightful in describing what it called "institutional gaps". Most institutions trying to cope with the environment/development challenges "tend to be independent, fragmented, working to relatively narrow mandate with close decision processes," the report said, and it concluded:

*Those responsible for managing natural resources and protecting the environment are institutionally separated from those responsible for managing the economy. The real world of interlocked economic and ecological systems will not change; the policies and institutions concerned must.*

Our existing institutions are the most serious obstacles to the transition to sustainable



development. Fundamentally reorienting them is one of the most significant challenges of our time. Progress toward sustainability requires new kinds of lateral thinking if we are to overcome the vertically organized bureaucratic systems, the reductionism of science, and the compartmentalization of information. Round tables were founded to overcome the constraints of the bureaucratic system and to analyze problems from a perspective that is cross-disciplinary, cross-jurisdictional, and cross-temporal. Accordingly, as recommended by the National Task Force, all round tables have diverse membership from sectors that traditionally have been adversaries.

The National Round Table and most provincial groups include cabinet ministers as members and report to the Prime Minister or Premier. The British Columbia Round Table reports to the Premier but does not have provincial ministers. The Manitoba Round Table, on the other hand, is chaired by the Premier and has four ministers as active members. The National Round Table reports to the Prime Minister and includes the ministers responsible for Finance, Energy, Industry, and Environment. However, at this point only the Minister of Environment participates consistently and actively.

Round table membership ranges from 15 to 28 members and all have full time secretariats, from five to 25 persons, headed by an executive director reporting to a part-time chair. The background of the chairs is remarkably diverse. The BC organization is chaired by a mayor, while those of Newfoundland, Alberta and Ontario are chaired by business people and the National body is headed by a former university president. The Yukon Round Table is chaired by an environmentalist, while the rest are headed by premiers or ministers.

## Function

While sharing the goal of promoting sustainable development, Canadian round tables have shown

remarkable diversity in approach. Most of those established by the provinces set out, initially, to develop conservation strategies or sustainable development plans. They created sector work groups, held public hearings and workshops, and, after considerable public consultation, presented reports to their respective governments. The National Round Table began its work by setting up committees on Waste Reduction, Decision-Making, Sustainable Development Education, and Foreign Policy, with a view to making recommendations to the Prime Minister and other decision-makers.

Round tables currently cover a wide range of issues and approaches; as examples, consider the work of round tables in B.C., Ontario, the town of Guelph, a university town of 87,000 people in Southwestern Ontario and the National Round Table.

### British Columbia Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (BCRTEE)

Created by the provincial government in 1990, BCRTEE's mandate is to develop a strategy for sustainability in British Columbia, propose better ways of resolving conflicts over the environment and the economy, and increase public understanding of sustainable development issues. In the first two years of operation, the round table published more than 14 background papers and five theme papers, convened eight workshops, held 26 public fora across the province, and published an impressive report, *Towards a Strategy for Sustainability*.

This preliminary, but comprehensive, strategy document sets out a vision of sustainability, with 12 recommendations on such matters as: consensus decision-making, encouraging local round tables, adoption of principles of "full cost accounting" and "user-pay", more integrated planning, and the need for state-of-sustainability reporting. It concludes with several specific recommendations on various areas of environmental and resource management, describing the next steps needed to refine elements of a more detailed sustainability strategy.

The new B.C. government of Premier Michael Harcourt endorsed the preliminary strategy and

gave the Round Table a new and broader role as it moved to the next phase of its work. Pursuant to this new mandate, BCRTTEE recently issued the first of its four-part strategy plans by publishing *A Sustainability Strategy for Energy*. The other three, just completed, are: *Education: Learning for Change*; *The Economy: An Economic Framework For Sustainability*; and *Communities: Strategic Directions*. These will form the basis for detailed public consultation before they are presented to Cabinet.

The British Columbia Cabinet has also asked the Round Table to work with the governments of British Columbia and the State of Washington to assess sustainability in the Georgia Basin Bioregion. This initiative focuses on effectively managing the impact of rapid growth in the Basin and will include such issues as urban growth, the environment, economic development, transportation, human settlement, and the quality of life. The Round Table's task is to facilitate consultation within B.C. with the public and affected local governments by convening and reporting on the results of a conference of stakeholders on Georgia Basin. The Round Table hosted a preliminary session last January to examine sustainability issues there, with future sessions being planned for later this year.

In order to carry out its new mandate of sustainability reporting in British Columbia, the Round Table has set up a new Monitoring Committee, which is to monitor and report on B.C.'s progress toward sustainability. That process will be a major focus, with the first progress report to be released in December, 1993. The committee will issue a preliminary report in the summer which will focus on the structure of the reporting process, as well as outlining the key issues involved.

The Monitoring Committee will examine three main areas: the provincial government's implementation of round table recommendations; the development of indicators of sustainability; and the province's response to agreements reached at the 1992 Earth Summit. It will also monitor the government's state-of-the-environment reporting process. Last December the Round Table co-hosted the first stakeholders' workshop on the

*State-of-the-Environment Report*, a document that was drafted by the Minister of Environment, Lands and Parks. It is the first of its kind in British Columbia, and will be released shortly.

## The Ontario Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (ORTEE)

Like many other Provincial Round Tables, the ORTEE took as its primary goal developing a sustainability strategy for the province. To do this, it set out what it saw as the six fundamental principles of sustainable development:

1. It is better to anticipate and prevent problems than to try to react and fix them after they occur.
2. Accounting must reflect all long-term environmental and economic costs, not just those of the current market.
3. The best decisions are those based on sound, accurate, and up-to-date information.
4. We must live off the interest our environment provides and not destroy its capital base.
5. The quality of social and economic development must take precedence over quantity.
6. We must respect nature and the rights of future generations.

ORTEE then created six sectoral task forces (energy and minerals; agriculture and food; forestry; manufacturing; transportation; urban development and commerce) to consult with stakeholders and arrive at a consensus on the next steps to sustainability. In addition, a native people's circle on environment and development was created. The work of the task forces culminated in a draft sustainable development strategy for Ontario titled *Restructuring for Sustainability*. This remarkable consensus document was released in September, 1992, and included recommendations for improved decision-making, greening Ontario's economy, local and workplace round tables, and ensuring greater accountability by establishing a commission for sustainability. ✓



A renewed Ontario Round Table was established in February, 1993 and given a broad new mandate to promote and monitor the implementation of the first Round Table's report, encourage development of workplace and community round tables, and act as a clearing house on multi-stakeholder problem solving strategies.

## **The Guelph Round Table on Environment and Economy (GRTEE)**

Established in 1988, Guelph's Round Table was one of the first set up in the Province of Ontario. Its 21 members meet monthly at 7 a.m. (to ensure participation) and represent a broad spectrum of sectors including public-interest groups, business, education, labour, government employees and elected officials.

The principal objectives of the GRTEE are twofold: the first is to promote environmental sustainability and to stimulate action by the community, business, and individuals, to promote and achieve this goal. Its second aim is to act as a forum for dialogue on environmental concerns raised by members or citizens, encouraging a co-operative, rather than a confrontational, response. The Round Table also acts as an educator on environmental issues and a body that often champions individuals and organizations pursuing programs to move Guelph closer to environmental sustainability. It acts as a catalyst to encourage specific changes in environmental practice and as a liaison between its members and their "constituencies". This means that whatever is learned from the dialogue can be transmitted and actions pursued.

Over the past four years, the Guelph Round Table has been involved in numerous and wide ranging activities. It has helped resolve disputes on such issues such as noise nuisance, pesticide spraying, fast food packaging, and wetland conservation. It also continues to provide input to a number of city plans and initiatives, including the Waste Management Master Plan, wet/dry recycling, and the Environmental Advisory Committee. GRTEE initiated the Guelph 2000 project, a multi-sectoral program in co-operation with several provincial

ministries, that is intended to foster a more cohesive approach to provincial programs relating to energy and water conservation. The GRTEE's role as a clearing house and catalyst has been so successful that the project is now being handed off to a new permanent body which will facilitate its co-ordination.

In April 1992, the GRTEE was officially designated by the municipality as the organization to develop a Green Plan for the City of Guelph. This document will set down green or environmental values, principles, and achievable goals or targets that reflect the vision of the people of Guelph, to be used to guide all the municipality's activities. Following discussions with the citizens, it became clear that if the Green Plan was to be credible, its preparation would have to involve substantial and extensive community participation. With the wide spectrum of interests represented in its membership, the Guelph Round Table was viewed as the best vehicle for receiving input and feedback from the public.

Accordingly, the GRTEE has the task of designing and implementing the entire process of collaboration. Its Community Involvement Program is intended to be education and raise awareness of environmental issues and initiatives in Guelph. Five "challenge papers" have been developed, on the topics of water, energy, transportation, land use and development, and solid waste, which will be distributed to all households in Guelph. A promotional campaign is planned, including a video, TV and radio programs, and media coverage. It is anticipated that these initiatives will spark dialogue among citizens, institutions, industries, and businesses. Community involvement and input will help identify environmental concerns and potential schemes that, in turn, will lead to development of the Green Plan.

The precise number of municipal or regional round tables in Canada is not known, but there are several hundred of them. Working with provincial round tables, the NRTEE is planning to collect their experiences and produce a profile of their work.



## National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy

During its first three years from June, 1989 to June of 1992 the NRTEE conducted major studies in several key areas, sponsored many workshops and conferences and generally acted as a catalyst to promote the principles and practices of sustainable development. Its thorough analysis of various issues leading to the UNCED Conference at Rio resulted in the NRTEE providing detailed advice to the Prime Minister. The bulk of the advice was accepted so that the NRTEE was able to make a significant contribution to Canada's official position at UNCED. Two NRTEE members were members of Canada's official delegation.

The current work of the NRTEE is organized into 13 programs:

### **Economic Instruments**

The limited assimilative capacity of our air, water and landscape to handle the wastes associated with economic activity is widely accepted as being one of the most pressing issues of the day. Traditionally the approach taken to reducing environmental degradation has been to rely on the enforcement of regulatory prohibitions on discharges into the environment. Increasingly, however, it has come to be recognized that once environmental standards have been set, market based instruments, or more accurately, "market mimicking mechanisms", can be less costly to firms and society in decreasing pollution levels in many areas.

As a result the NRTEE catalyzed the launching of an Economic Instruments Collaborative in early 1992 and has actively participated in it since then. Canada is by all accounts unique in having constructed this process for achieving consensus on market based instruments. The Collaborative, which is composed of representatives of environmental groups and private companies, most of which are based in Alberta, as well as government observers, has concentrated on the application of economic instruments to acid deposition, climate change and ground level ozone. At a meeting February 20-22 in Calgary the members satisfactorily brought the program to a conclusion by agreeing on

the design of instruments for each area. The Collaborative will propose an SO<sub>2</sub> emissions trading demonstration project for Alberta, and a system of carbon charges on fossil fuels for small stationary and mobile sources in Canada. This would be coupled with a system of transferable offsets or credits for domestic and international actions to capture or reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For ground level ozone it will recommend an approach to instituting trading programs for NO<sub>x</sub> emissions from stationary sources.

Now that the substantive work has been completed, the Collaborative will seek to enlist support for its findings and recommendations, especially among governments and the broader public.

### **Forest Round Table**

NRTEE's Forest Round Table brought together at a national level all the main groups and associations with a stake in Canada's forests - representing all sides from environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, through unions and academics, to industry, aboriginal groups and government. The round table members worked intensively over 18 months and hammered out a common set of principles to which they could all agree for the future of Canada's forests. The principles have now been published, and each group is working on an action plan covering the contribution it will now make in support of those principles. While the prime goals of the group have now been achieved, it has chosen to develop a checklist which local groups will be able to use when faced with specific decisions surrounding clearcutting in their region. The group will meet at the end of October, to complete this work.

### **Pulp and Paper Round Table**

Following its experience with the forest sector, the NRTEE recently began work with Canada's pulp and paper sector on sustainable production of paper and paper products. Over 20 national groups dealing with pollution, wildlife, recycling, packaging, industry, and consumers, met for the first time in February, 1993. The group will work for consensus on four major issues: sources of fibre;



manufacturing processes, marketing and consumption, and jurisdictional questions. The group has met three times and is working on a set of common principles.

### ***Consensus Decision-Making***

The national, provincial and territorial round tables of Canada joined forces in 1992 to develop a common guide which will assist individuals, organizations and governments in reaching decisions where several stakeholders are involved and consensus is sought among an array of different value sets. While the guide is aimed specifically at questions to do with sustainable development, it will form a useful contribution to the area of conflict resolution as a whole. Several task force meetings have culminated in a final text, which has been ratified by all round tables and published.

### ***GATT, Biodiversity and Rural Renewal***

In September 1992, the NRTEE hosted a workshop on the interaction of the several forces which impinge on rural life in Canada, encompassing such diverse topics as rural development, biodiversity, agricultural support, environmental impacts, and international trade. Following the workshop, the Round Table commissioned a position paper on rural renewal which was presented at the plenary in May, 1993. The paper has since been circulated for discussion and feedback.

### ***Sustainability Reporting***

While economic reporting is well developed and common place, state-of-environment reporting is still in a developmental stage. Monitoring our progress toward sustainability, however, requires new kinds of indicators that bridge environment, economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development in a framework that can assist decision-making. The Task Force on Sustainability Reporting is working on a final Report that can form the basis of advice to the Prime Minister and be a pilot for annual reporting on progress towards sustainability.

### ***Trade and Sustainability***

The Task Force on Trade and Sustainability sponsored a multi-stakeholder workshop at Ottawa on the North American Free Trade Agreement and particularly on the proposed side agreement on the environment. A second workshop was held in Washington in April. This work culminated in advice to the Prime Minister. Subsequent work will focus on the broader and critical relationship of trade to sustainability issues.

### ***Sustainable Communities***

Preliminary work is underway to determine how the NRTEE can work in partnership with provincial and municipal round tables to further promote the work of local round tables on environment and economy, building on the recent NRTEE book titled *Towards Sustainable Communities*.

### ***Sustainable Fishery***

At the NRTEE Plenary in St. John's, Newfoundland, in July 1993 the members discussed what role the NRTEE could play in assisting the development of new policies relating to the devastation of the east coast fishery.

### ***Sustainability and Prosperity***

In partnership with the Institute for Research on Public Policy, the Task Force on Sustainability and Prosperity oversaw a year-long research program that culminated in 10 discussion papers, a national symposium and detailed advice to the Prime Minister on the business opportunities that Canada can realize in the transition to sustainability. The advice covered such diverse subjects as the greening of industry, the elimination of environmentally perverse subsidies, the promotion of economic instruments, and new policies for trade, green industry and sectoral round tables. Together, the recommendations argue that sustainability can be the key to competitiveness in the 21st century.



## **PROJET DE SOCIÉTÉ - Planning for a Sustainable Future**

In partnership with other national sustainable development agencies, the NRTEE chairs a national multi-stakeholder process that includes over 40 sectors of Canadian society and is the principal Canadian process for follow-up from Rio. The Working Group, also chaired by the NRTEE, tabled at the second national stakeholder's meeting in June, 1993, a major research document that set out Canada's commitments at Rio, a process for identifying gaps in implementation and a framework for the development of a National Sustainable Development Strategy for Canada.

### **Task Force on Education**

The Mandate of the Task Force on Education is to provide a context for looking at alternative methods and thinking, leading toward the implementation of sustainable development in Canada. This is accomplished through various means, including: working with the media; challenging the academic community to become more involved; finding and providing fora to stimulate national debate on sustainable development; challenging the best thinkers in the country in defining sustainable development and a sustainable society; continuing to develop a broad-based, popular education program; and acting as a catalyst to stimulate similar objectives among other stakeholders.

The Task Force has developed a kit for model youth round tables, that includes the National Round Table's poster outlining the Objectives for Sustainable Development. The kit has been made available to various teacher organizations and has been simulated with the Forum for Young Canadians.

Through its predecessor, the Standing Committee on Education and Communications, the Task Force has developed a very successful Sustainable Development Education Program. This program called, Learning For a Sustainable Future, is fully operational with its own Board of Directors and has a mandate to assist Canadian educators in understanding and implementing the concept and principles of sustainable development in the formal education systems.

## **The Communications Program**

The NRTEE Communications group produces the National Round Tables Review (Canada's National Newsletter on Sustainable Development), a quarterly that covers various sustainability issues and highlights the work of provincial and municipal round tables.

The Sustainable Development Series has produced 10 books in less than two years. Recent titles include: *Toward Sustainable Communities; Trade, Environment and Competitiveness; and Covering the Environment: A Handbook for Environmental Journalism.*

To reach out to Canadian young people, the Communications Group, with sponsorship from several Canadian corporations, produced a successful rock video (COURAGE) with a leading Canadian recording artist that promotes the concepts of sustainability.

## **Commentary**

The most common questions asked of round tables is how successful they have been and why business leaders, environmentalists, and governments have participated so actively in them.

### **Can we evaluate the success of Canadian round tables?**

In many respects, it is too early to do a real assessment. They are small new organizations with limited resources, bringing together - not people of like minds, but traditional adversaries. The scope of their task is nothing short of revolutionary. They require a paradigmatic shift in thinking and governing. They challenge nearly all the assumptions of classical economics. They threaten vested bureaucratic interests, in the public and private sector. While it would be understandable if they had achieved very little in fewer than four years, they have, in fact, achieved a great deal:

1. Most provincial round tables have spanned jurisdictions, departments, and sectors and have developed sustainable development strategies and action plans for their regions. These have a

powerful potential for integrating environmental, social, and economic policies.

2. In the absence of institutions or departments with the specific mandate to promote sustainability, many round tables have already changed the way governments make decisions. Manitoba is perhaps the best example, where the Round Table and the Sustainable Development Committee of Cabinet are chaired by the Premier, who has said: "Our government has adopted sustainable development as the cornerstone of our overall economic and environmental agenda and we have started the journey towards sustainability."

Our societies have enacted some very bad economic policies because environmental considerations were ignored, just as many environmental regulations have been ineffective and misguided because economic and social factors were not considered.

Making environmental policy without concern for the social or economic considerations is relatively easy: the commitments to sustainable development and the multi-stakeholder make-up of round tables forces them to consistently confront the tougher questions of integration and to keep these issues constantly in front of their governments.

3. Freed from vertically organized bureaucratic structures, round tables have been able to study issues and make recommendations that cut across traditional lines, breaking out of the jurisdictional gridlock that currently pervades the Canadian political system. It has been said that more than half the programs currently pursued by the National Round Table could not even find a home elsewhere within the federal system. Its power to convene diverse sectoral interests allows the NRTEE to act as a catalyst that stimulates new ways of thinking about some of our most intractable public policy issues, particularly in areas fraught with jurisdictional fragmentation.

4. All round tables have bridged old rivalries and contributed to a greater understanding of our need to work together if we are ever to cope with the challenges of sustainable development. For example, environmentalists have been exposed to the perspectives of senior executives from the public and private sector. They, in turn, have had opportunities, in some cases for the first time, to engage in frank discussions with, and more fully understand the point of view of, the environmental community. With this frankness and lack of posturing trust develops and parties move closer to "truth-telling" that, in turn, leads to a complete redefinition of the nature of the issue being discussed and overcomes many of the myths and perceptions that have worked against more collaborative approaches in the past. This indirect result of round table activity is difficult to estimate but undoubtedly has very significant benefits.

5. Even in the absence of reliable sustainability indicators, many round tables now have a mandate to monitor implementation and evaluate progress towards sustainability. This is a critical function that individual government departments cannot carry out on their own. The role of the round tables as independent monitors is likely to increase in importance as strategies and action plans are completed.

### Why do business leaders participate in round tables?

The short answer is enlightened self interest. Many business people now see the competitive advantage and the necessity of shifting to more sustainable practices and they want to explore ways of breaking out of the old adversarial approaches of command, control and confrontation. In a recent book, *Collaborating*, Barbara Gray sets out the contextual forces that will move companies to find common ground. She lists six:

1. rapid economic and technological change;
2. declining productivity growth and increasing competitive pressures;
3. global interdependence;



4. blurring of boundaries among business, government, and labour;
5. shrinking federal revenues for social programs;
6. dissatisfaction with the judicial process as a means of solving problems.

The fact is that these forces influence nearly every Canadian company and certainly all companies in the resource sector. Round tables are relatively safe ways for business to explore more collaborative approaches, with the advantage of having a neutral chair operating within a multi-stakeholder framework.

### Why do environmentalists participate in round tables?

Their reasons are many and diverse. While not all environmentalists are avid participants, most are willing to sacrifice time and even reputation. Even Greenpeace is now a part of an NRTEE multi-stakeholder process. There are three reasons that motivate environmental groups.

First, having spent 10 to 20 years on the outside, representing the public interest and trying to effect change through the media and confrontation, many groups now believe they can be more effective working on the inside, dealing directly, and making their case face-to-face with business, labour and governments. Round table multi-stakeholder processes are particularly convenient because environmentalists come to them as equals in a structure that is more open, inclusive, and consensus-based.

Environmentalists find round tables useful opportunities to learn. They meet other interests directly, testing positions and learning from responses. The openness of round table processes can lead to trust and a willingness to share current information, while obtaining a broader understanding of the issues, opportunities, and constraints involved.

The intimacy and continuity of round tables allow environmentalists not only to advocate their

positions, but also to engage in real debate and even to begin touching on fundamental values. Round tables are virtually the only institutions we now have that allow for this degree of engagement - and only at this level are we going to achieve real cultural change.

### Why do governments participate in round tables?

Most governments at the national, provincial and municipal levels have come to realize that they are poorly organized to deal with the cross-jurisdictional aspects of sustainable development. Existing departmental structures work against the integration of environmental and economic decision-making, because no one department has a mandate to promote sustainable development.

Governments also recognize that interest groups and the public now demand a greater degree of involvement in the decision-making process. Voting every four years, or shallow and last minute consultation, is no longer acceptable. Round tables provide a framework for moving beyond consultation to genuinely engaging members of the public.

It has been said that politics is the art of the possible. Certainly, policy making is the art of the feasible and there is no better way for governments to determine the feasibility of proposed policies than to subject them to round table processes. Consensus-seeking bodies such as round tables can provide governments with advice that has already been "washed" through a process that minimizes subsequent conflict and surprise.

## Conclusion

It has been said that the new institutions to promote sustainability will be based more on partnerships and networks than on the traditional hierarchical model and that out of these networks ("the natural home of new information") will evolve new system structures. A recent book has described the essence of these networks:

*"A network is by definition non-hierarchical. It is a web of connections among equals. What holds it*

*together is not force, obligation, material incentive, or social contract, but rather shared values and the understanding that some tasks can be accomplished together that could never be accomplished separately" (Meadows, Meadows, Randers).*

This is a fairly accurate description of the Canadian Round Table movement particularly when one considers that the multi-stakeholder quality of round tables allows them to even go one step further and be the network of networks.

Canada's Round Tables on Environment and Economy do not replace existing institutions but they may be critical as catalysts to promote the institutional change that must occur if we are going to begin to manage our transition to sustainability.

Ronald L. Doering  
Executive Director  
National Round Table on the  
Environment and the Economy.









